Pasadena City Hall
100 North Garfield Avenue
Pasadena
Los Angeles County
California

HABS No. CA-420

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

America's City Halls

Name: Pasadena City Hall

Location: 100 North Garfield Avenue, Pasadena, Los Angeles County, California
Bounded by Garfield Avenue on the west, Ramona Street on the north, Euclid Avenue on the east and Union Street on the south.

Present Owner: City of Pasadena

Present Occupant: City of Pasadena

Present Use: Municipal Offices

Significance: Pasadena City Hall is significant as the central and dominant building in the Pasadena Civic Center, a complex of civic, institutional and cultural buildings which is one of the finest examples in the nation of the ideals of the City Beautiful movement.

City Hall itself is the keystone of this assembly of Mediterranean style buildings, a style particularly appropriate to Southern California. Its individualistic design embodies the formal classical elements of the Italian Renaissance accented by exuberant Baroque touches in the central tower structure. The Baroque courtyard fountain set amid plants and decomposed granite walks creates an atmosphere reminiscent of the California missions. A fine example of the California Mediterranean style, City Hall evokes California's Spanish heritage as well as European models. The unique quadrangle plan combines well the needs of a modern office building with the free movement between indoor and outdoor space so desirable in the Southern California climate.

The central motif, the massive dome, was designed to dominate the skyline of Pasadena as a symbol of the City and the civic pride of its citizens. Historically, the building of City Hall and the completion of the Civic Center complex in the 1920's represent a high point in Pasadena's history as the principal early cultural center of Southern California and as a city of extraordinary wealth and civic pride.

Part I. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1926-1927.

The building permit for City Hall was issued on January 15, 1926, and construction began on January 21. The building was completed on October 25, 1927, and was occupied by City staff on November 11, 1927. City Hall was officially opened on December 27, 1927, when the public was invited to take tours of the building. No cornerstone was laid, and there were no official dedication ceremonies. The building was slightly damaged in the San Fernando earthquake of 1971. The urn and ball atop the cupola were knocked askew but were repaired and replaced within a few months.

2. Architect: John Bakewell, Jr. and Arthur Brown

On April 22, 1924, a five-member jury composed of members of the City Planning Commission and architects announced to the City Board of Directors (City Council) results of a competition for designs for the three principal buildings of the Civic Center: the City Hall, the Public Library and the Civic Auditorium. The design selected for the City Hall was by the San Francisco architects, Bakewell and Brown. Both architects were graduates of Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. They were also the architects of San Francisco City Hall.

Originally designed with a bell tower reminiscent of Mission architecture as the dominant feature, the plans were revised a number of times in the ensuing months to satisfy the jury members and the City Board of Directors. First a bell tower without bells was adopted. In October of 1924, the architects were authorized by the Board to proceed with the working plans of a design resembling a modernized version of the tower on the San Gabriel Mission. However, continuing controversy over the design resulted in new drawings being submitted in June of 1925 showing a dome as the central motif.

Concern about the escalating cost of the building caused the Board to request the architects to prepare alternative drawings which would allow construction of the dome at a later date. These perspectives proved so unattractive that, in the end, the design with the dome was finally erected at a cost of well over a million dollars. At the time, Pasadena had a population of about 45,000 people.

3. General contractor: Orndorff Construction Company.

Fourteen bids in all were submitted for the general contract on January 4, 1926, which was awarded to Orndorff Construction Company of Los Angeles on January 16. Additional contracts awarded at that time went to William Smith Stone Co. of Pasadena for the cast stone work on the building, Brombacher Iron Works of Los Angeles for the structural steel used in the tower structure, Foss and Jones of Pasadena for plumbing and heating and Jensen Electric Co. for the electrical work. Other contracts for elevators, interior finishing, etc. were awarded later, after construction had already begun.

4. Original plans and construction:

Pasadena's City Hall has undergone virtually no exterior and alterations since its construction in 1926-1927. Interior alterations have been extensive as offices have been changed to accommodate changing needs. Only the Council Chambers and Room 302 have survived relatively intact. (See Bibliography in Part III for location of original drawings, etc.).

5. Alterations and additions:

Those minor exterior alterations which have been made include the walling up of certain doors and windows visible from the courtyard and the concourse. These alterations have been carried out by the Building Maintenance Department without the involvement of an architect. Four large cast stone urns which once graced the garden around the fountain have been removed.

B. Historical Context:

The City Hall was constructed as the second municipal building (after the Public Library) of Pasadena's Civic Center complex. Since its completion in 1927, the City Hall has housed the offices of Pasadena's City government.

Perhaps the most influential person in the planning of the Civic Center and the design and construction of City Hall was Dr. George Ellery Hale, the famous astronomer. Hale presented the idea of a comprehensive city plan to the Board of Directors in January, 1922. The Board established a Planning Commission in April 1922 with Hale as a member, and Stuart W. French, retired industrialist and friend of Hale as chairman. The first act of the Commission was to commission Bennett, Parsons and Frost of Chicago to prepare a city plan. Hale, a native of Chicago, had already been in touch with Bennett, receiving advice from him on the proper composition of a Planning Commission and on the basic elements needed in a city plan.

The central feature of the Bennett, Parsons and Frost plan (and the only portion to be completed) was the Civic Center. Although the final plan was not completed by the consultants until April 1925, the location of the three Civic Center buildings had been established as early as January 1923. A $3,500,000 bond issue approved by the voters on June 7, 1923, made the project a reality, and the balance of 1923 was spent in assembling the land required to build the City Hall, Library and Civic Auditorium.

Hale suggested a juried architectural competition for the three principal civic buildings, the Library, the City Hall and the Civic Auditorium. In December 1923, prominent California architects (some recommended by Bertram Goodhue, Hale's close friend) were invited to submit designs. The list included Bakewell and Brown; Bliss and Faville; Willis Polk (all of San Francisco); Allison and Allison (Los Angeles); Carleton Winslow (Los Angeles); Johnson, Kaufmann and Coate (Los Angeles); Marston, Van Pelt and Maybury (Pasadena); Myron Hunt (Los Angeles and Pasadena); Bergstrom, Bennett and Haskell (Pasadena architects, except for Bergstrom of Los Angeles). Each invited architect was required to submit a design for each of the three buildings.

In April of 1924, the jury (with Hale as chairman) announced the selection of the Bakewell and Brown design for City Hall, the Myron Hunt design for the Library and the Bergstrom, Bennett and Haskell design for the Civic Auditorium. The drawings of the rejected designs were returned to their originators with payments of $1,000 to each firm.

Construction of the Library began first and the building was completed in February, 1927. Construction of City Hall began in 1926 and was completed in October, 1927. Two bond issues appropriating funds for the Civic Auditorium failed to pass, postponing construction until 1931-1932.

Part II. Architectural Information

A. Description of Exterior

Pasadena City Hall is a rectangular U-shaped building outlining a spacious garden courtyard. On the outside it measures 351 feet north and south and 242 feet east and west. The east side is a one-story arcade; the other three sides are three stories high, with small towers at each corner and a dome over the west entrance. The area covered by the rooms and passageways totals 170,000 square feet.

The main entrance on the west side forms support for the massive dome above by means of a series of columns and piers which have a rusticated texture to increase the effect of strength and solidity. This rustication is repeated in the frames of alternate windows of the first floor and in the corners of the building.

Above the main entrance is a pediment surmounted by a large cartouche featuring the City Seal, a crown (Pasadena is known as the Crown City) and a key. Two smaller side entrances surmounted by lions' heads carrying oak leaves flank the main entrance. The arched main entrance leads to a coffered barrel-vaulted concourse which gives access to all parts of the building and to the garden courtyard. Another entrance is through the arcade on the east side.

The massive circular tower structure rises perpendicularly for six stories. The fifth story is 41 feet high and pierced with four huge round arches and four smaller ones. The next story, set back a little, is 30 feet high and is also pierced with arches. On top of this comes the dome, 26 feet high and 54 feet across, a six-inch concrete shell shot on by the gunite process. The exterior of the dome is covered in fishscale tile in shades of red which harmonizes with the red Cordova clay tile roofs of the building. On top of the dome is a leaded copper lantern which has weathered to a dark gray. The lantern is a column-supported cupola 41 feet 9 inches high, surmounted by an urn and ball. The highest point is 206 feet above the ground.

Unlike its prototypes, Santa Maria della Salute in Venice and the Hotel des Invalides in Paris, the Pasadena dome is an open airy belvedere by virtue of the two levels of arches supporting it. It features large viewing platforms which provide a panorama of the city and the mountains. Within the dome itself is a "whispering gallery". From the ground the openness of the tower structure presents a pleasing contrast of buff-colored plaster arches against the blue sky.

Motifs of the main entrance and tower structure are repeated in alternate windows on the first story. The design of the alternate windows is a rusticated frame surmounted by a pediment containing a lion's head and carried down through the base by means of the cast stone balconies of these windows. The alternation of these decorated windows with the plain windows around the entire exterior of the building creates an architectural rhythm which leads up to and culminates in the powerful note of the central motif.

The placement of the second story windows matches that of the first story but these windows are devoid of ornament and somewhat shorter than those of the first story. A frieze featuring metopes of garlands of fruit alternating with triglyphs runs above the second story windows around the entire exterior. The third floor attic story is set back slightly behind a balustrade and is covered by a gabled Cordova clay tile roof.

In contrast to the Renaissance Palladian exterior, the interior garden courtyard has a strong Spanish Colonial atmosphere. Cloistered arcades paved with red Padre tile surround the garden which is centered by a large cast stone Baroque fountain. Paths of decomposed granite define the formal flower beds and lawns. California live oak trees and large silk floss trees (planted in the 1950's) provide shade for the beds of azaleas, hydrangeas, rhododendron and rotating annuals. The sound of splashing water and a view of greenery are available from virtually every office.

Basic construction of the building is of reinforced concrete with the tower structure constructed of structural steel. From the bed of the San Gabriel river came 35,000 tons of rock and gravel, which were combined with 32,000 barrels of cement to make 20,000 cubic yards of concrete. This concrete had a compressive strength of 2,000 pounds per square inch in 28 days, far stronger than the usual specifications of that day, and the contractors were required to guarantee this strength -- something then unheard of. Harvey W. Hincks, experienced civic engineer, was superintendent of construction, charged with seeing that all specifications were met. Building inspectors tested the strength of the concrete throughout the course of construction.

A reinforced concrete mat weighing 17,120 tons supports the tower and dome. The mat measures 104 feet by 100 feet and is five feet thick. During construction of the mat, concrete was poured continuously for 84 hours.

The structural steel frame of the tower required the use of a derrick larger than any ever used on the Pacific Coast. The steel was wrapped with steel wire fabric and fireproofed with concrete before it was put in place, thereby ensuring the framework of the tower against possible dangers of rust or fire.

B. Description of the Interior:

Pasadena City Hall is designed to merge the interior offices with the garden courtyard. The arcades outlining the garden form the circulation corridors of the building with offices opening off them opposite the garden. Large arched windows paralleling the arcade arches provide ample light and ventilation to the offices. The offices themselves are of simple design with doors and interior woodwork of vertical-grained white oak.

The main staircase to the south of the concourse has Alaskan marble treads, a graceful curved wrought iron banister and is illuminated by a skylight. Stair towers at each corner of the courtyard provide access to each floor. They are crowned by leaded copper cupolas which replicate in smaller scale the lantern on the dome. Wrought iron lanterns and massive bronze light sconces accent the corridors and staircases.

On the second floor a tile-paved gallery with a beamed ceiling and a Cordova tile roof serves as the circulation corridor with offices opening off it as on the first floor.

The Council Chambers on the second floor in the southeast corner of the building have elaborately carved oak entrance doors. The interior features a beamed ceiling with stenciled decoration on acoustic material. A low carved oak balustrade separates the public from the members of the Board of Directors, who sit at a semicircular oak table. The simple interiors of the Council Chambers and the offices contrast sharply with the grandeur of the exterior design.

Site:

Pasadena City Hall is located on North Garfield Avenue, one block north of Pasadena's main commercial street, Colorado Boulevard, and about equidistant between the Public Library terminating Garfield Avenue on the north and the Civic Auditorium terminating Garfield Avenue on the south. Garfield Avenue forms the principal axis of the Civic Center.

City Hall itself faces west, terminating Holly Street, the secondary axis of the Civic Center, and planned as a main approach from the western entrance of the city. A sharp rise in the topography just one block west of City Hall enhances the dramatic effect of the building when approaching on Holly from the west. The large plaza in front of City Hall, surrounded by two small parks and other Mediterranean style Civic Center buildings, the Post Office, the YWCA, the YMCA, the Gas Company and the County Courts Building, evokes the

great public plazas of Europe. Specially designed light standards and a special paving pattern of multi-colored brick set the plaza off from the rest of the city.

Landscaping around the building features a double row of magnolia trees lining the brick-paved sidewalks and a double row of carob trees lining the Holly Street approach. The grounds around the building itself are lawns bordered by a low concrete wall at the sidewalk. Dark green yew trees planted between the large first-story windows accent the building design. Pittosporum bushes flank the east entrance stairs and a row of Washingtonia palms accents the arches of the east arcade.

Part III. Sources of Information

A. Architectural Drawings:

A set of original blueprints on linen of City Hall is in the custody of the Administrative Services Agency, Building Services, Pasadena City Hall. Fifteen photographs of drawings of various designs for City Hall by Bakewell and Brown and by Bennett, Parsons, Frost and Thomas are located in the Urban Conservation Office, Room 207, City Hall. Two original watercolors and three black-and-white photographs of the Civic Center plan are also located in the Urban Conservation Office. The original map of the city presenting the proposals of Bennett, Parsons and Frost for the City Plan is located in the vault of the Public Works Office, Room 211, City Hall. About 200 phographs of the progress of construction of City Hall are owned by Harvey Hincks, 1090 King St., San Gabriel, CA., 91776. Mr. Hincks is the son of Harvey W. Hincks, who was superintendent of construction of City Hall. Photographs of the progress of construction submitted by Orndorff Construction Company are in the Pasadena Public Library Reference Room.

C. Bibliography

1. Primary Sources:

a) Minutes of the Board of Directors, City of Pasadena, Volumes 30-37 (1922-1928). Consult index volumes under headings "Civic Center," or "City Hall". Located in Office of the City Clerk, Pasadena City Hall.

Report No. 8: Dec. 1, 1923.

Program of the Competition for the Selection of an Architect or Architects for a City Hall, a Public Library and an Auditorium for the City of Pasadena.

Report No. 27: Dec. 7, 1925.

A Report on a Plan for the City of Pasadena, California. Bennett, Parsons and Frost, April 30, 1925.

Report No. 45: Dec. 7, 1927.

Letter from Edward H. Bennett of Bennett, Parsons and Frost, Nov. 11, 1927.

c) Contracts. Located in Office of City Clerk, Pasadena City Hall.

Contract No. 1019. With Bakewell and Brown, Architects.
Contract No. 1143. For structural steel with Brombacher Iron Works.
Contract No. 1144. With Orndorff Construction Co.

d) Papers of George Ellery Hale. Located in Archives, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California 91125.

Box 11, Folder: City Planning Committee, 1921-1928.
Box 73, Folder: City of Pasadena, 1910-1925.
Box 18, Folder: Mr. and Mrs. B. O. Goodhue, 1919-1928.
Box 95, Diaries, 1922-1927.

2. Secondary Sources:

The Pasadena Star-News contains numerous articles documenting the planning and construction of City Hall and other Civic Center buildings. A special City Hall edition of Dec. 26, 1927 has much valuable information. A complete list of the articles used in the preparation of this document is located in the City Hall file, Urban Conservation Office, Room 207, Pasadena City Hall. The Pasadena Star-News is available on microfilm in the Pasadena Public Library, Reference Room.

Bakewell, John, Jr. "The Pasadena City Hall." Architect and Engineer, June, 1928, pp. 35-39.

"City Hall Story." Pamphlet prepared by Reference Division, Pasadena Public Library, 1966. Second printing, 1978.

Orbison, R. V. "A Worthy Center for the Crown City," The American City Magazine." Nov. 1926, pp. 678-679.

Pasadena Heritage. "Pasadena Civic Center, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form." September 15, 1978 (see also for additional bibliography).

"Stuart W. French." National Cyclopedia of Biography, Vol. 35 (1949) p. 371.

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Further research in the Pasadena Star-News covering the period of the planning and building of City Hall would certainly yield additional information. Records from the architectural firm of Bakewell and Brown

(located in the Bancroft Library at University of California, Berkeley) might yield more information. Records of the firm of Bennett, Parsons and Frost (if they exist) might also be investigated. Records of any of the firms invited to enter the competition might also be useful.

E. Supplemental Material:

Report of Civic Center Jury, Feb. 28, 1924.

Prepared by Ann Scheid
Assistant Survey Coordinator
City of Pasadena
Urban Conservation Program
August 1, 1981

Report of Civic Center Jury

February 28, 1924

Design Number 25 has been awarded first place. The plan of the City Hall takes advantage of the rectangular site to give a large cloistered court which forms the garden vestibule of the building. The masses of the building form a continuous uniform width surrounding the court; this uniform width permits a flexible disposition of partitions for the various sizes of rooms necessary for the different departments of the City government. In fact, in this respect, the floor plans afford all the practical advantages of a modern office building, following one of the best known types where the building is erected around the four sides of a central court. Constructed along the simple straightforward lines of the plan, this building should be economical as regards construction costs.

The arcades and the circulation through the garden give a perfect system of circulation and access to all departments, while the small stair towers in the four corners of the court complete this system and lend additional interest.

The author of this design presents suggestions for immediate construction and future extension of the building, including the belfry, which forms the central motif on the axis of Holly Street. Further study will give opportunity to perfect the design. Generally the mass of the facade and its simple lines will make the City Hall the dominating center of the group of Civic buildings.

Minutes of Board of Directors
Volume 32, pp. 284-285